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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews recent approaches and models for diverse learning environments, with specific emphasis on fostering the retention and educational achievement of ethnic minority students at community colleges. In 1997, 22.8 percent of all associate degrees were awarded to minority students, a 7 percent increase from 1987. But compared with their share of total student enrollment, minorities remain underrepresented in degree awards. This reflects general trends throughout higher education in which minority students tend to have lower persistence and graduation rates as well as lower levels of academic preparedness. For minority community-college students, family and academic support factors emerged as playing a significant role in enhancing academic achievement and success. Research also indicates that an association exists between students' cultural background and their preferred learning styles. For example, African-American students' achievement appears to be positively related to oral experiences and interpersonal relationships. The successful integration of students into the college environment is a crucial element of raising retention rates. Some common efforts at community colleges to achieve such integration are freshmen seminars and mentoring programs. Contains 10 references. (JA)

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Minority Student Retention and Academic Achievement in Community Colleges

By Katalin Szelényi

The American college campus, like society as a whole, is experiencing an expansion of racial and ethnic diversity. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, ethnic minorities represented 28 percent of the population in 1998. By 2050, minorities are projected to account for 47 percent of the population (Aragon, p.2). These demographic trends are also apparent in the enrollment patterns of American colleges and universities: ethnic minorities accounted for more than half of the 30 percent expansion in student enrollment between 1976 and 1994 (Aragon, p.2). As a result of their geographic accessibility, open-doors admissions policies, and reduced costs, community colleges are especially likely to serve a diverse student body. Currently, ethnic minorities comprise approximately 30 percent of student enrollments at American community colleges (Laanan, p.19).

With the continuing diversification of the student population of community colleges, problems concerning the educational attainment and retention of ethnic minority students persist (Sanchez, p.35). While in 1997 22.8 percent of all associate degrees were awarded to minority students, a 7 percent increase from 1987, compared to their share of total student enrollment, minorities remain underrepresented in degree awards (Aragon, p. 3). This reflects general trends throughout higher education, in which minority students tend to have lower persistence and graduation rates, as well as lower levels of academic preparedness and achievement, compared to their white counterparts (Jalomo, pp. 8-10). This Digest, drawn from "Beyond Access: Methods and Models for Increasing Retention and Learning Among Minority Students" (*New Directions for Community Colleges*, Winter 2000), reviews recent approaches and models for diverse learning environments, with specific

emphasis on fostering the retention and educational achievement of ethnic minority students at community colleges.

Diverse Students, Diverse Needs

The culture-specific values and experiences that students bring to the educational environment may significantly contribute to their individual learning preferences. For community colleges, shaping the instructional climate of classrooms in a way that best benefits the individually and culturally influenced differences in learning styles, value systems and educational preferences of their student population holds special significance.

Educational Choices

Community college students are influenced by a variety of distinct factors when making educational and career-related decisions. In the case of minority students, family and academic support factors emerged as playing a significant role in enhancing academic achievement and success (Laanan, p.23). In a nationwide study, using data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program housed at the University of California, Los Angeles, Laanan found slight differences between the educational choices made by minority and non-minority students. Of eight items studied, minority students were more likely than white students to report that the following factors were important reasons for college attendance: (1) parental influence; (2) inability to find a job; (3) desire to gain a general education; (4) desire to improve reading and study skills; (5) desire to become more cultured; and (6) desire to learn things that interested them. White and minority students placed similar emphasis on getting a better job and asking more money as reasons for attending community college (Laanan, pp. 27-29).

Learning Styles

Research indicates that a close association exists between student cultural background and their preferred learning styles. Students' individual learning preferences are typically accompanied by culturally determined tools that influence the way they process information and, depending on the fit between teaching and learning styles, facilitate or hinder their educational achievement (Sanchez, pp. 37-38). Sanchez cited two concurrent studies examining the impact of culture on the learning preferences of Hispanic and Native American college students in the southwestern United States. In comparison to white students, both Hispanic and Native American students exhibited a high propensity for participation in active, concrete learning experiences, cooperative situations, and elaborative processing (p. 42). Similarly, African-American students' achievement appears to be positively related to oral experiences and interpersonal relationships (Palma-Rivas, p. 78).

Enhancing Retention and Learning

The successful integration of students into the college environment is a crucial element of raising retention rates. Some common efforts at community colleges to achieve such integration are freshman seminars, mentoring programs, and strategies developed to create a supportive campus climate.

Freshman Seminars

The freshman seminar, otherwise referred to as student success course or extended orientation course, may provide a suitable environment for facilitating interventions to improve students' persistence. Freshman seminars assist students in identifying campus resources, establishing relationships with other students and with faculty members, and assessing and improving their academic and life

management skills (Stovall, p. 46). Students who have enrolled in a student success course generally earn higher grade point averages, complete a larger number of first-term credit hours, and increase their persistence and graduation rates (p. 52). Stovall, in a recent study examining a Midwestern public rural community college, found that enrolling in a success course may be particularly beneficial for ethnic minority students. When the academic achievement of course participants and nonparticipants was compared, participation was associated with a .872 rise in first-term grade point average for minority students, as opposed to a .401 increase for white students (p. 47).

Mentoring

Mentors, by providing career-related and psychosocial assistance to their protégés, provide the individualized attention students need in dealing with the everyday problems they encounter in the college environment. A widely used mentoring model is AMIGOSTM—the acronym for Arranged Mentor for Instructional Guidance and Organizational (or Other) Support. Under this model, after matching a protégé with a mentor on the basis of a careful assessment of both mentor and protégé's personality types, the pairs participate in problem-based activities, training and information sessions about classes, assignments and other institutional resources. Mentors and protégés also partake in social activities either within or outside the institutional environment. AMIGOSTM is currently used by many organizations and educational institutions nationwide. Preliminary findings suggest that there is a positive association between participation in a mentoring program and the persistence rates of minority students (Stromei, pp. 5961).

A similar approach is taken by the Puente Project developed in California to facilitate the retention and transfer rates of Hispanic students. The Puente Project was initiated in 1981 and is currently in use at 38 two-year institutions. The programs emphasize culturally relevant instructional programs and pair students with Hispanic mentors and counselors. The programs have achieved high retention rates and high transfer rates. Almost half of the students who complete the Puente Project transfer to four-year institutions (Zamani, pp. 99-100).

Campus Climate

Having a campus climate in which diversity is valued is an important factor contributing to the comfort and

educational success of minority students on community college campuses (Clements, p. 71). In a conscious effort to create such a supportive environment, Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts developed programs with an emphasis on supporting cultural diversity and global awareness. Seven key initiatives included: (1) changing the focus of the orientation program to emphasize the importance of valuing diversity; (2) developing an easy-access program for English-as-a-Second-Language students; (3) revising a portion of the student activities budget to focus on programs that address issues of diversity; (4) creating international student fellowships; (5) creating an international club on campus; (6) integrating the appreciation of cultural differences into the freshman seminar curriculum; and (7) developing a student improvisational theater troupe. Although minority student retention still lags behind white student persistence at the college, the new programs reduced the gap existing between the two groups (Clements, pp. 63-71).

Role of Faculty

Creating an environment in which minority students can thrive is also the responsibility of individual instructors. White faculty members, who remain in the majority in most community colleges in the nation, often emphasize the learning styles influenced by their cultural background (Townsend, p. 90). However, these instructional practices may not be congruent with the educational preferences of minority students. Townsend suggested that an important step in overcoming these obstacles is to become aware of how culturally determined frameworks shape one's attitudes toward teaching. Faculty participation in study groups and workshops addressing issues of racial identity is one way of facilitating conversations of the diverse needs of today's student populations (pp. 89-90). In addition, teachers should structure their instructional activities with consideration to the diverse learning preferences represented in their classrooms (Sanchez, p. 43).

Conclusion

Community colleges are engaged in a variety of efforts to facilitate the retention and educational achievement of ethnic minority students. Successful efforts, whether institution-wide or in the individual classroom, place a strong

emphasis on consciously building upon the diverse needs of the student population and facilitating the integration of ethnic minority students into the educational environment. Studies conducted to examine the effectiveness of these efforts indicate a positive contribution to retaining ethnic minority students. In order to reap the full benefits of innovative practices, future research is needed to further examine the programs already in place, with the ultimate goal of developing models that two-year institutions can adopt and modify according to the needs of their student bodies.

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This Digest is drawn from "Beyond Access: Methods and Models for Increasing Retention and Learning Among Minority Students." *New Directions for Community Colleges*, Number 112, edited by Steven R. Aragon. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, Winter 2000.

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